# Ten Ideas for Creative Writing in the EFL Classroom

#### By Rigoberto Castillo and Grady Hillman

Creative writing can offer avenues of expression, build reading and writing skills, as well as much-needed confidence in the classroom. Creative writing also fosters self-esteem and builds important communication bridges between learners and the teachers who work with them. The authors have tried their ideas at schools of all levels; they have learned that students of all kinds profit in many ways from creative writing, but even more so when their own lives are the object of the descriptions.

The rationale and the exercises presented here should provide many jumping-off points for other ideas and projects. We encourage their use with learners of a second language because they draw on the experiences of the participants, forcing them to look inside themselves for inspiration. This should help them to understand that their feelings and visions have value.

The exercises aim to encourage self-expression. Besides developing creativity, these exercises can reduce the affective filter, foster self-esteem, enhance communication skills, and improve the student's interest and confidence in learning to read and write in a second language. As with creative arts, the process of self-reflection and the recognition and resolution of conflicts bring many inherent educational benefits.

### **Exercise 1: Three Minute Free-write**

**Rationale**. Writing needs to be considered as a process. A discovery process is part of creative writing, i.e., you do not get it right the first time. Using free-write helps the learner become aware that a satisfactory product is obtained at the end of a process and not in a moment of "inspiration." For L2 intermediate students who write between 40 and 80 words in a three minute session, free-write can be considered a transition stage in which revising and editing are necessary steps to produce an original piece of writing.

At every writing session, begin by having learners put down as many words on the page as they can in three minutes. Encourage them to write about whatever is on their minds. Have them count and record their words to see if they are building fluency. Do not collect and read this work unless the learners ask you to. Allow them to tear it up and throw it away, unseen, as soon as they are finished.

Free-write contributes to the achievement of two goals: It shortens the distance between thoughts and the written word; and it gives the learners the chance to free their minds from the load they bring with them to class. Most learners feel a renewed energy once free-write is over. Being able to capture thoughts in writing results in freeing us from this load. That may explain why writing a journal (diary) has a therapeutic effect on us.

In most cases, learners want to keep on writing because they have found something of interest. Once they have jotted down ideas on a theme, they have something to review and develop as opposed to looking up at the ceiling waiting for inspiration. In sum, free-write is a technique to advance and develop ideas on a theme, and it is useful for any kind of writing.

## **Exercise 2: The Journal**

**Rationale**. Free-write can become a means for introducing diary writing in class. Motivate students to write by arguing "we write better than we speak."

Encourage intermediate and advanced learners to keep a daily journal. Allow learners to write in their diary for ten minutes every class. As this is a private document, you may wish to assist the learner by providing or suggesting a secure place where it can be kept away from the curiosity of classmates or family. Check to make sure they are maintaining their journal, but don't insist on reading it. Allow students to share their journal with you if they wish.

## **Exercise 3: Ten Impossible Things**

**Rationale**. Learners receive plenty of practice in expressing the "here and now." Their ability to project into the future or to imagine other worlds is not allowed much room in most curricula.

In this exercise, students are asked to write a list of ten things that are impossible. They may list such "real life" impossibilities as getting straight A's on their report cards, or use their wildest imagination envisioning their desk flying to the moon or their pencil turning into a sports car. The idea is to expand their visionary capacity and to allow them to imagine the fantastic.

#### **Exercise 4: Dreams**

**Rationale** . Dreams tend to possess dramatic qualities. Dreams last an average of fifteen minutes, but in this short time we can visit many places and spend days that seem awfully long. Some types of dreams may be those that are recurrent, serial, clairvoyant ( *deja vu* ), flying, slow motion, or invisible. The student can write as if s/he were dreaming right now, e.g., "I am standing in front of a\_\_\_\_\_."

Have learners describe a dream they have had. Of most interest may be recurring dreams, dreams about deceased relatives, or "prophetic" dreams where they dream about an event before it happens. Encourage students to be as specific as possible in their use of imagery, painting a vivid word picture including all of the five senses.

Once learners have finished, they can volunteer to read their pieces aloud. If they are unwilling to read their papers, the teacher may collect the papers and read them aloud to the class without saying the author's name.

#### **Exercise 5: Memories**

**Rationale**. Memories are another source of inspiration for writing. In this case we are the characters, and the landscape of our lives is shaped by changes in our state of mind. Moments of pain, fear, love, or peace are the seeds of memories in the same way that conflict is the heart of fiction.

Ask the students to describe their very first memory, asking that they include vivid details. You might ask them to describe the most tranquil or joyous memory they have. Ask them to describe a special hiding place they had when they were young--a place that was safe and secure.

## **Exercise 6: Music Writing**

**Rationale**. Combine free-write and composition writing for this exercise using music without lyrics such as the sound track to *Dr. Zhivago*, *Ravel's Pathetique pour un Nouvelle*, *or Andreas Vollenweider's Behind the Garden Wall*.

Dim the lights and ask learners to free-write to a section of music. The piece selected should evoke imagery. It is not necessary that learners tell a story. Let them know that it is fine if their imagination skips around; writing should simply follow it. After a five to seven minute session, allow learners to go back and select their favorite part of their free-writing and expand it into a short story or poem.

# **Exercise 7: Future Writing**

*Rationale* . A Rip Van Winkle-type experience will stimulate the students' imaginations.

Have students pretend they have slept for 100 years and awakened to the world of the future. Ask them to describe it in detail.

## **Exercise 8: Shaped Poetry**

**Rationale**. Expressing feelings and making them fit into a shape challenges the imagination. For instance, love poems may be written with the words outlining the shape of a heart. But students

should be encouraged to do something more offbeat, where unusual connections between form and content are made. There is abundant literature for poetry ideas (See Koch 1990).

Have students write a description or a poem in which the shape of the writing plays an important role by sculpting an image.

#### **Exercise 9: Short Stories**

**Rationale**. Conflict is the heart of fiction and vividly drawn characters are its victims and victors. Inform students that in the best fiction, the main character's problems get worse before they get better. In other words the writer ought to let the character squirm a little. The flow of a story is important even if learners have to resort to their native language at some point.

Have students fill out a character sketch of themselves, someone they know, or an imaginary person. Explain that the heart of all good fiction is conflict and have them start the story. They should describe a scene where we are introduced to the characters and their problems within a typical setting. If they opt to carry the story through to its conclusion, instruct them to follow the character from scene to scene as the character goes about solving the problem. They should let the story happen by "showing" through description, not by "telling" us what the character does.

## **Exercise 10: Poetry**

*Rationale* . Second language learners are often intimidated by poetry because they are convinced it is hard to understand. To get them started, it may be very helpful to read some poems to learners. Poems by Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman are easy to find, and many of their works are easy to understand. Using poems from diverse backgrounds that reflect the multiculturalism of English speaking countries is recommended.

Ask learners to write about their feelings--both good and bad--and paint word pictures. Poetry does NOT have to rhyme. What distinguishes it from prose is that there are no extra words, and the words that the poet uses have a sound value, as well as a meaning value.

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# References

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